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Unitarian Horizons

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"AS THE SWIFT SEASONS ROLL"

THE familiar words came over the air, all the way from the great Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, on the last day of the year; and by the magic of the voices which sang them, they seemed to stand out and impress themselves upon my mind as though I were hearing them for the first time. They brought a vivid sense of the inexorable passage of days and years

and decades, and they lent a new impressiveness to the injunction to build more stately mansions. I found myself wondering what the poet himself would have felt if he could have been sitting with me in front of the radio and heard his own words coming across the desert and the great plains and the mountains by the amazing modern device which we have so quickly learned to take for granted.

THE INEXORABLE CALENDAR

CERTAIN it is that the seasons roll swiftly by. Those of us who follow the calendar of the church year know how little time there is between Christmas and the beginning of Lent, even in the years when Easter comes late. This year, Easter comes early, and Ash Wednesday falls on February 7. A parish minister who gave no thought to the plans for Lent until after he had recovered from the celebration of the Christmas season would this year find himself hurried, and perhaps even harassed, by the swiftness with which his belated preparations would have to be made. The sensible parson lays out his plans for the whole year, at least in broad outline, during the preceding summer; and so when Ash Wednesday follows hard upon the heels of Epiphany he is not caught napping. He has learned the inexorableness of the calendar, and the

advisability of keeping a close watch on the future.

FROM HAND TO MOUTH

BUT not all parsons are sensible, and even the best of us have our times when a hand to mouth existence seems better than the exercise of foresight and the hard labor of long-range planning. Someone—perhaps it was Oliver Herford—once perverted the proverb to read "Never do today what you can put off till tomorrow". That is sound advice for a few people all of the time, and for all of us once in a while; but it is dangerous for ministers, whose besetting sin is apt to be procrastination.

Churches, too, are liable to the temptation to live from hand to mouth. Many of them handle their finances on this principle, never letting their minds run ahead of the end of the current fiscal year, and sometimes thinking in terms of getting last month's bills paid before this month's become due. I have heard of churches which compelled their ministers to live under the constant dread of getting so far behind in their personal finances—simply because the salary checks came so irregularly—that the nightmare of unpaid bills interfered with their sleep as well as their sermons. And in most cases the one thing really needed was a reasonable amount of looking ahead and making

plans accordingly. There is really very little to be said in defence of this sort of business, yet it continues to plague the life of ministers and treasurers in more churches than I enjoy thinking about.

LOOKING AHEAD

ON the other hand, there are churches that think ahead, so far as their financial policy is concerned, with as much care and effectiveness as any successful business house must use. I once knew a church finance committee that always thought in terms of five years ahead, with the result that most of the possible losses from decreased contributions and almost all of the unusual items of heavy expense were anticipated and provided for. At best, of course, there will be unexpected disasters; but there is also the theoretical possibility of a reserve fund for just such unpredictable emergencies. Usually, I suppose, the possibility remains in the realm of theory—but not always; and even a church of modest size can exercise sound business judgment in the management of its financial affairs.

But I had no intention of letting myself be drawn aside into the vexed questions of church finance. I was thinking of the value of looking ahead in the planning of the religious program of a church, and specifically of the value of making plans for the observance of Lent far enough in ad-

vance so that they will not be impaired by last-minute decisions. Nobody can improvise an effective series of Lenten sermons, and it is foolish to attempt it. It would be much better to wait a year, if necessary, and then carry out a well-considered plan.

"ADDRESS TO THE LIVING"

FOR three years now there has appeared at about this time a little booklet called "The Unitarian Lenten Manual". This year's manual was prepared by Herbert Hitchen, minister of the Unitarian Church in West Newton, Massachusetts, and it bears as its title the words "Address to the Living". The cost is ten cents, and I wish it might come into the hands of every Unitarian.

The three manuals which have thus far been published belong together. They represent three different points of view within the wide fellowship of mind and spirit which is characteristic of the Unitarian Church. Each of the three clergymen who have written these booklets has made a distinctive contribution, and as the series continues through the years it will constitute a valuable witness to that diversity within unity which is the glory of our denomination.

This year's manual approaches the spiritual problems of our day from the point of view of

contemporary poetry. The pages of the booklet constitute an anthology of modern religious verse which would be worth many times the cost price for which it is offered. There is none among us with a wider knowledge of recent poetry than Mr. Hitchen, and none with a deeper or truer sense of spiritual values. Anyone who will use the manual day by day through this coming Lenten Season will find his inner resources fortified and replenished, his vision broadened and clarified, and his grasp upon the essential values of religion strengthened. Here is an opportunity for personal self-examination and self-discipline of the highest order.

"SPIRITUAL DEDICATION"

THE practice of observing Lent is rapidly growing among Unitarians. This is shown by the increasing use of the Lenten manuals, but even more clearly, I think, by the response which has been made to a suggestion for mid-week Lenten services in our churches on the general theme of Spiritual Dedication, using the weekly topics of the manual as the basis for the series. The suggestion came originally from Waldemar Argow, minister of the Unitarian Church in Syracuse.

Unfortunately, the suggestion came too late for the kind of careful planning for which I have been

pleading; and it is obvious that it cannot be put fully into effect until the Lenten Season of 1941. But even so, many of our churches, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, have agreed to unite, as far as may be practicable, in the effort to use this present Lent as an occasion for mobilizing the spiritual forces of our people and rededicating our united strength to the high ends of a free people stirred by a free faith. Next year, I hope we may have a plan for the observance of Lent which will carry out the full purpose of Mr. Argow's suggestion, and whatever is done this year will make next year's achievement greater and more significant. In my opinion, there has been no more important development within the Unitarian Church for a generation, and I would urge upon all my fellow Unitarians the desirability of doing their utmost to strengthen and deepen its influence among us.

A UNITED EFFORT

As an indication of the response which Mr. Argow's idea has evoked, let me cite the result of the first step which was taken to explore the possibility of doing something even at short notice to carry it out this year. I wrote to nineteen parish ministers, asking whether they would consent to act as sponsors of the idea. Within a very few days, I had received nineteen

replies, and nineteeen were favorable. Not all of them could promise to adopt the plan this year, for in some cases their own plans had been carried too far to be changed; but they were all sympathetic. From all parts of the country, and from men of widely different theological convictions, the response indicated the presence of a new awareness of spiritual need and a reassuring desire to find a way to meet that need by a united effort. Unitarians are learning the value of standing together, of seeking and worshipping together—as the swift seasons roll.

F. M. E.

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